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### Courage and Conscience

In his poem, "The Diameter Of The Bomb," Yehuda Amichai writes:  
 The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimeters  
 and the diameter of its effective range about seven meters,  
 with four dead and eleven wounded.  
 And around these, in a larger circle  
 of pain and time, two hospitals are scattered  
 and one graveyard. But the young woman  
 who was buried in the city she came from,  
 at a distance of more than a hundred kilometers,  
 enlarges the circle considerably,  
 and the solitary man mourning her death  
 at the distant shores of a country far across the sea  
 includes the entire world in the circle.  
 And I won't even mention the crying of orphans  
 that reaches up to the throne of God and  
 beyond, making a circle with no end and no God.

The poem's message is clear. War is devastating, brutal and ugly. It knows no bounds, inflicting immeasurable suffering, including the entire world in its circle of violence and misery, and promising no end to the anguish it inflicts on humanity. In Amichai's poignant words we feel the destruction, the pain, the loss, the senselessness and the immorality of the effects of just one bomb.

Indeed, the magnitude of its horror stuns us into silence. For in addition to how incomprehensible and terrifying it is to us, it reminds us, that no matter how smart or successful or wealthy we are, or how great is our false sense of security or capacity for denial, we human beings, and our precious lives and loves, are wholly and desperately fragile. As Americans, we learned this truth again from the tragedy of this year's Boston Marathon Massacre.

And as Jews, we know well the fragility of life and are unfortunately all too familiar with war. From Joshua and the judges and kings of ancient Israel to crusades, pogroms and the Holocaust, we have had our fair share. We know what it is like to suffer and to lose. And since the founding of the State of Israel, we also know what it means to win at the cost of the lives of others. As Golda Meir famously said, "We might be able to forgive them for killing our sons, but we will never be able to forgive them for forcing us to kill theirs." Indeed, even if we deem a particular offensive as necessary, support it in principal and believe it to just, if we force ourselves to look closely it sickens us. The images of bombed-out buildings, crying women and, inevitably, the bodies of innocent bystanders, is a

painful experience (Eric Yoffie, "On Gaza, Sense and Centrism," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, December 31, 2008).

This time, too, the agonizing images included crying women and bodies of innocent bystanders, some 1429 of them, including 426 children, their remains wrapped in white sheets with only their faces exposed, all of them victims of a predawn poison gas attack in the suburbs of Damascus as they lay sleeping in their beds on August 21st. And this was not the Assad regime's first use of chemical weapons, but more than likely its fourteenth. Indeed, in little more than two years, the Syrian civil war has distinguished itself as a particularly vicious conflict. The United Nations estimates conservatively that more than 100,000 people have died, including thousands of women and children, with civilians often directly targeted or killed in indiscriminate assaults. The Assad regime has deployed an array of nasty weapons, from cluster bombs to napalm-like incendiary devices and thermobaric explosives, whose blast of pressure and heat incinerates anyone at the impact site ("The immoral silent killer: Why chemical warfare instills in people a fear that conventional attacks do not," Tom Blackwell, *National Post*, August 30, 2013).

Knowing this, it should not have come as a surprise to anyone that Assad turned to sarin, a chemical weapon of mass destruction, to kill more efficiently in order to expedite his victory. Because of the children present, I have removed the detailed descriptions of the effects of this gas from this sermon. But there is a reason that Chemical Weapons are truly weapons of terror and have long been viewed by the world as an immoral way to wage war. From the 1925 Geneva Protocol to The Chemical Weapons Convention Ban in 1997, there have been international efforts to stop their use. Indeed, in 1997, all but Syria and six other countries agreed and, 85% of the world's stockpile has been destroyed -- an action unprecedented in the history of arms-control. And the agreement to ban them is based not only on their capacity to terrorize, kill, disfigure and destroy on a mass scale, but also because they warn of far worse atrocities. In other words, once a nation or its leaders demonstrate that they are willing to cross that "red line" who knows what other atrocities they might be willing to perpetrate!?!

Which brings us to Syria. Like much of the Arab Spring, what began, January 26, 2011, as a peaceful demonstration for political reforms and civil rights, has become, largely by Assad's machinations, a sectarian civil war between he and his minority Shiite followers and the largely Sunni Syrian majority. The entire region, really the whole world, have taken sides in the conflict with Iran and Hezbollah, along with Russia and China, allying with Assad and Saudi Arabia, along with most of the Arab world, and much of the West, us included, allying with the opposition, although doing little to actively support it. The conflict has spilled over into Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Jordan, not only with fighting, but also with the displacement of over two million Syrians seeking refuge. (For comparison, proportionally, these two million people would be equivalent to 30 million American refugees; imagine the displacement of the population of the entire state of California). The already burdened Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has had to absorb a half a million Syrian refugees. What makes the situation even more complicated is that while some of Assad's adversaries are of the democracy

seeking Free Syria Army who began the movement for reform, many others are members of Al Qaida, who, as we know too well, have also perpetrated atrocities against innocents and in whose hands chemical weapons would be equally devastating.

In a Rabbinic Symposium, hosted by AIPAC that I attended in August, expert after expert said that Syria is a moral, political and military disaster, a lengthy, severe, brutally violent morass, with no right answer as to how to address it. At best, no matter who "wins," if there could be such a thing as "winners," the likeliest outcome would be some loose confederation of the many factions negotiated in a Geneva Convention type conference. But presently there is no strategy, or willingness on any side, to reach that goal and Assad has made it clear he is in it for the long haul. We can make no mistake about it though, the outpouring of refugees, overflow of violence and proliferation of chemical weapons are not good for anyone and that includes not only Israel, but also the Arab and Western worlds, and our own United States.

And as Congress considers whether or what we are to do about it, contemplating military action as soon as next week, so many questions haunt us. They include big picture considerations like: whether attacking Syria with targeted missiles wouldn't bring further suffering to the Syrian people, or two neighboring countries, many of whom would likely die in Assad's reprisals; whether acting alone, or at all, would serve the United States' best interest; and whether doing nothing militarily to answer Assad's crimes might be construed as weakness and embolden both he and Iran, not to mention North Korea, Hezbollah and other dictators and terrorist groups to use chemical and nuclear weapons in the future? There are also strategic questions being raised: what is the goal of the proposed strikes and what purpose would they serve; are Assad's enemies, some of whom are members of Al Qaida, who might benefit from such an attack, any better for U.S. interests, or Israel's for that matter, than he is; and, if we did intervene, who would pay for it? And, finally, there are philosophical issues being debated: do we really know what is in the best interests of other peoples; is it the role of the United States to be the international police force; and are we, the United States of America, the final arbiters of morality?

These are all worthy questions deserving of thoughtful discussion and answers. But like most of you, I don't have them. I am not a politician, or a military strategist or even a political science maven; I fully acknowledge that many of you are also very well read on these subjects and, even if you aren't, most of you have opinions on what should or shouldn't be done by our government, to which you are absolutely entitled, and which you will likely share with me. But I do know something about Judaism and what it says. And I am qualified to share with you, on this first day of the New Year, the values it teaches us, the demands it makes upon us, and what it considers the sins for which we must atone during these High Holidays.

"*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, justice, justice shall you pursue" we read a few weeks ago in Torah (*Deuteronomy* 16:20). To me this is a guiding principal of Judaism, the imperative to bring holiness into the world by doing that which is good, right and just. The rabbis have asked for hundreds of years why is the word justice repeated

twice? For gravity and necessity, they answer. A world devoid of justice is tantamount to a world without air and water; its quality is so integral to the very fabric of society that it must be pursued irrespective of whatever challenges may present themselves. In other words, while it is clear that the ends cannot justify the means, we must still strive to fulfill the command: *tzedek tzedek tirdof*, justice, justice you must pursue, in spite of its difficulties and the obstacles in its path. As one *midrash* explains, "what does it mean be holy, to be just? It means to emulate God. As God is patient, kind and merciful, so are we to treat our fellows with patience, kindness and mercy. Just as God feeds the hungry, we are to feed the hungry. As God helps the poor, so are we to help the poor. And just as God lifts up the fallen, so are we to lift up the fallen." We are to embody those traits in all our dealings even when it is hard, or challenges must be overcome, or it is costly. That is what *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, justice, justice you shall pursue means.

Yet another guiding principal of Judaism, also found in the Torah (*Deuteronomy 22:3*) is: *lo tukhal le'hit'alem*, most often written and translated as "you shall not remain indifferent," *lo titalem*. But here, the commandment's unusual formulation (the addition of the word *tukhal*) makes its implication much stronger: You cannot remain indifferent. Among the most clear examples of this principal also comes to us from the Torah (*Deuteronomy 21*) when Moses tells the Israelites that when they arrive in the Promised Land, they should do something that to us would seem quite strange today. He tells them if a corpse is found lying in a field, and no one knows who the killer is, the elders and the judges from the town closest to the slain person should take an unyoked heifer, meaning an innocent calf, and lead it to a barren place and break its neck. Then, they are instructed to wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley, and declare, "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. Accept this atonement for your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, and do not hold your people guilty of the blood of an innocent person."

The rabbis comment, "Would anyone even consider that the elders and judges are the perpetrators of this unsolved murder?" Of course not. Even so, they take responsibility for the stranger because leaving the slain, defenseless and vulnerable to the elements, is unthinkable. It is inconceivable because the Bible's moral compass brings responsibility to bear on human events. Responsibility is not the same as guilt. The elders of the city were never accused of murder. But they stood up to accept responsibility. Our spiritual ancestors shuddered to imagine a world where people could commit horrible crimes, and nobody would be held responsible (Rabbi Jonathan Miller, Birmingham, AL).

Taking responsibility -- not remaining indifferent-- is incumbent upon us as well . . . in every area of our lives: we cannot abandon our parents in their time of need; nor are we allowed to see our neighbor struggling and not help him; nor may we ignore the plight of those who are most lacking in our midst; nor may we stand idly by while innocents are suffering anywhere. On *Yom Kippur* we will atone collectively for our failures of justice: For keeping the poor in the chains of poverty and turning a deaf ear to the cry of the oppressed; for using violence to maintain our power, and for using violence to bring about change; for waging aggressive

war, and for the sin of appeasing aggressors," *lo tuchal l'hitalem*, because we cannot remain indifferent and far too often, and, shamefully, we do.

And finally, we have the guiding principal of these High Holidays, *u'vacharta va'chaim*, choose life, that you and your children might live long lives. Choosing life does not mean taking care of your health, although that is a noble and holy pursuit. Choosing life means choosing the kind of life you will live: a life of goodness, kindness and righteousness in all our relationships and dealings. It means living a life of fulfilled responsibilities and commitments to those we love and to our community. It means committing to a life of duty to God and country and humanity. *U'vacharta va'chaim*, choose life, means doing the right thing, for yourself, your family, your congregation, your community and the world.

The Torah doesn't say do whatever you want; it says, "Do as God commands you, *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, pursue justice!" It doesn't say, it's not my problem, let somebody else worry about it; it says, "*lo tuchal l'hitalem*. You cannot remain indifferent!" And it doesn't say, nobody is looking, this time I'll take the easy way out; it says, in all ways, live righteously, "*u'vacharta v'chayim*, choose life!

Unfortunately, the Torah doesn't say whether the United States of America can or should bomb Syria, with or without congressional approval, with or without UN support, unilaterally or not. So what are we to do? I know that 60% of Americans would answer, "nothing," to this question. There are so many reasons for this statistic, not the least among them is that we are battle weary from our long, costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, that most deem a failure, and reticent to get embroiled in another potential quagmire.

Not surprisingly, I've been invited by some of our younger congregants to "like" the Facebook page of a movement called "No War on Syria." For different reasons, but arriving at the same conclusion, isolationists on the right and anti-war activists on the left advocate many non-military avenues for dealing with the situation: that we attempt to deliver massive humanitarian aid to the victims and organize an international effort to help with the flow of refugees; that we engage all political avenues including robust, round the clock diplomacy with Russia, with the Arab League and with the U.N. Security Council, hoping that they might prevail on Assad to stop the bloodshed; that we employ economic sanctions; and, finally, that we use the International Criminal Court to punish him.

These are noble ideas and certainly ought to be pursued, but knowing the world as we do, and the middle east in particular, these humanitarian and, especially, these diplomatic efforts, are not likely to succeed in curtailing Assad's abuses of power. Why? Because they assume that we are dealing with a person who shares our morality, the ultimate value we place on life and our rationality. As Ari Shavit, veteran analyst of Israel's premiere newspaper, *Ha'aretz* wrote: "What's happening in Syria proves the validity of Netanyahu's warning that the greatest danger to world peace in the 21st century is the combination of unconventional weapons and unconventional regimes. Lunatics really are insane. Barbarians are really barbaric. Huns will be Huns. Those who act mercifully toward Huns bear direct responsibility for the fact that nuclear weapons are being built in Iran, chemical weapons are being used in Syria and doomsday weapons threaten the future of the Middle East. . . Those who underestimate the inherent danger of the

Huns bear direct responsibility for the deaths of today's victims, the Syrians, and tomorrow's victims, the Israelis, Europeans and Americans. It's time to break free of the moral relativism, multicultural hypocrisy and political correctness that prevent us from seeing our evil neighborhood as it really is. A terrible warning siren is being sounded in Damascus. Do we hear it? Does the world hear it?"

And then there is our, the Jewish people's, experience in World War II. In a visit to the concentration camp Dachau, near Munich, just last week, German Chancellor Angela Merkel laid a wreath in memory of the tens of thousands the Nazis murdered there. "The memory of their fate," she said, "fills me with deep sadness and shame . . . How could Germans go so far as to deny people human dignity and the right to live? Places such as this warn each one of us to help ensure that such things never happen again." Indeed, we are all too aware of the bottomless human capacity to commit evil, or to look away when evil is committed. And so, it is happening again. We cannot allow our fear and our indifference to prevent us from facing it head on. In the words of Eli Wiesel, " . . . whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation, we must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented . . . There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest."

We cannot remain neutral or silent in the face of the horror perpetrated by Assad against his people. Based on our teachings and the reality of our times, if we can alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people in any way, we should because it is the right thing to do. And if we could cripple Syria's military industry, by taking out its missile factories, its scientific research facilities which produce the chemical weapons, its anti-aircraft missile batteries and their command posts, we should because they threaten the lives of all people everywhere including Israel and us. And if we could punish Assad for what he has done without killing innocents, we should because it sends a strong message, not only to him, but also to Hezbollah, North Korea, Iran and any other terrorist group or dictator in the world that we will not tolerate the use of chemical or nuclear weapons anywhere.

And finally, we should act, because, as Secretary of State Kerry said last Friday, "being battle fatigued does not exempt us from doing the right thing and, regardless the cost, it is who we are. We are the United States of America. We are the country that has tried, not always successfully, but always tried to honor a set of universal values around which we have organized our lives and our aspirations. This crime against conscience, this crime against humanity, this crime against the most fundamental principles and norms of the international community, this matters to us. And it matters to who we are." And I would add, it matters to us as Jews as well because the pursuit of justice, not remaining indifferent and choosing a worthy life are not just good ideas, they are imperatives for us as Jews and human beings.

This morning we read about Abraham's test. God commanded him to take his son, Isaac, to Mt. Moriah and to offer him up there as a sacrifice. Volumes have been written on his test of faith. To these commentaries we add for our time: Abraham faced an impossible choice. But like we Jews today, Abraham, the first Jew, was deeply committed to our Jewish heritage and faithful to a just God who

has given us the Torah whose commandments have been our ethical guide for centuries. Abraham, as we do, believed in a God who promised an everlasting covenant to our people and who has kept that pledge regardless of the vicissitudes of history and life we have endured.

There is no question that Abraham's conscience, as our's, warned him of the inherent dangers in the task before him and the potential devastating loss that was at stake. Yet his courage also inspired him with deeper faith, which saw him through it for the betterment of humanity and the world. May our courage inspire us with deeper faith so that we, too, might see our trial through for the betterment of the people of Syria, the State of Israel, our country and for all the peoples of all the nation's of the earth. Amen.